

John Donne 'Twickenham Garden'

Contexts and perspectives

In the York Notes study guide to John Donne's poems, Phillip Mallett describes the poem as "a variation on a standard poetic theme, the contrast between the joys of spring and the miseries of the lover whose lady is unkind." The lady to whom the poem is addressed is Lucy, Countess of Bedford, who was the married patroness of several poets, including John Donne. She lived in Twickenham (in south west London) from 1608 to 1617.

This kind of poetry was very popular in 17th century England. It was influenced by the poetry of the medieval Italian poet, Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), an influence that was the product of his poetry having been translated into English during the previous century. Phillip Mallett's explanation of the tradition of Petrarchan poetry is helpful; it is: "distinguished by the elaborate and extravagant comparisons applied to the lady, who is as cold and remote as she is beautiful, and to the despairs of the lover, presented as her devoted and suffering servant." However, although Donne draws on these conventions, his poem is much darker, and it ends on a bitter, mocking note that can be seen as a rejection of the conventions.

Summary

Blasted with sighs and surrounded with tears, I come to this garden to check out the spring, and my eyes and ears get such a soothing that would, in different circumstances, cure everything. But I betray myself by bringing love, a poisonous spider which changes everything, and can convert the food of heaven into bitter bile. And so that this place can really be considered the garden of Eden, I've even brought the serpent with me.

It'd be better for me if winter turned out the lights on the glory of this place, and if a bad frost stopped these trees laughing and mocking my face. But because I can neither endure this disgrace nor yet stop loving, Love, let me become some senseless piece of this place. Turn me into a mandrake plant so that I can groan here, or a stone fountain weeping for a year.

Lovers, come here with your crystal bottles and take my tears, which are the wine of love, so that you can test your mistress' tears at home. If hers don't taste like mine, she's faking it. Hearts don't shine in the eyes, and you can no more judge a woman's thoughts by her tears than judge what she's wearing from her shadow. Perverse sex – none are faithful but my woman, whose faithfulness to her husband is killing me.

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Explanations

Make sure you are clear about the meanings of these words in the poem, using close analysis of the word in the context of its line, the glossary in your edition of the poems (if available), dictionaries, and perhaps an encyclopaedia.

Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
4	balms	
6	transubstantiates	
7	manna	
7	gall	
9	the serpent	
11	benight	
12	grave	
14	that	
17	mandrake	
19	vials	
23	hearts do not in eyes shine	

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Explanations – teacher's 'here's one I made earlier' version

Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
4	balms	Fragrant ointments used to heal or soothe the skin.
6	transubstantiates	In Christian theology, converts the substance of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ at consecration, only the appearances of bread and wine still remaining.
7	manna	In the Bible, the substance miraculously supplied as food to the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16); often used in Christian contexts to mean spiritual nourishment.
7	gall	The contents of the gall bladder; bile.
9	the serpent	Alluding to the Old Testament story in which the devil, disguised as a serpent, tempted Eve to desire that which was forbidden (see Genesis 3).
11	benight	Turn into night.
12	grave	Solemn; but obviously also a hole dug in the ground to receive a coffin or corpse.
14	that	Because.
17	mandrake	The mandrake plant was supposed to groan if uprooted.
19	vials	Small containers used especially for holding liquid medicines.
23	hearts do not in eyes shine	Consider this phrase in relation to the notion that eyes are the windows of the soul.

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Themes and issues, attitudes and values

1. Written in response to the Petrarchan tradition, this poem is clearly about love. But what particular aspects of love are explored?
2. The opening line of the poem uses the conventional imagery of "sighs" and "tears" to portray the persona as the conventional Petrarchan male lover. By the end of the poem, however, the persona appears to have lost patience with the ideals of courtly love. Which lines suggest this? What attitudes to love does this loss of patience imply?
3. John Donne uses the lover's complaint to make some strong statements about the nature of women. Look at lines 24–25, and line 26. What are these statements?
4. These statements about the nature of women can be interpreted in at least two ways. Some critics see them as evidence of misogyny (hatred of women); others as evidence of male frustration with the power women have over them. What do you think?

Language

Stanza 1

1. The opening line conveys a very powerful impression of the lover's condition. This is partly achieved through the aural impact. What do you notice about the sounds of the words?
2. In line 3, the body parts "eyes" and "ears" are mentioned. What do these words suggest about the nature of the persona's love?
3. Donne uses a contrast between "spring" in the first stanza and "winter" in the second. What do these seasons conventionally symbolize? How does the persona use them to support his argument?
4. In line 4, medicinal imagery is used – "balms" and "cure". What does this suggest about the persona's attitude to love?
5. In lines 5 and 26 the interjection "O" is used. What effect does this create?
6. In line 6, Love is compared to a "spider". Why?
7. In lines 6–9, a number of Christian images are used to describe the persona's love. What are they? What do they suggest about the speaker's attitude to love?

Stanza 2

1. In lines 1–3, the words "winter", "benight" and "frost" create a sombre mood. With their connotations of death, what do these words suggest about the importance of love? How does this juxtaposition of love and death make you feel?
2. What metaphorical technique is used in line 4? What effect does this create?
3. Why is "Love" capitalized in line 6?
4. There is a tone of desperation in lines 7–8, achieved partly through the aural impact of the words. What do you notice about the sounds of the words?

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Stanza 3

1. There is a tone of bitterness in lines 1–4, achieved partly through the aural impact of the words. What do you notice about the sounds of the words?
2. In lines 5–7 the tone is very forthright. What is it about the words that makes it seem so?
3. The words “true” and “truth” are repeated 4 times. Why? What effect does this create?

Structure

1. It has been argued that part of the emotional power and integrity of Donne's poems is created by the use of a structure which follows the logic of natural thought processes. To what extent do you agree with this statement in relation to this poem? Give reasons and evidence for your answer.

Form

1. Annotate a copy of the poem to show its rhythm.
2. In what metre is the first line written? What effect does this create?
3. In what metre is most of the rest of the poem written? What effect does this create?
4. What do you notice about the rhythm of line 17?
5. What effects are created by these changes of metre?
6. The rhyme scheme of the poem is ababbccdd. What does this shift from interlaced rhyme to couplets in each stanza suggest about the progress of thought?

Personal responses

1. How do you respond to the thematic and stylistic aspects of the poem?
2. If you were Lucy, Countess of Bedford, what reactions or responses might you make to the poem?
3. What responses might other readers have? A militant feminist? A White Van Man? A love-struck teenager whose would-be lover is surgically attached to somebody else? A happily married woman?